

Testimony Opposing HB 0403

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman and members of the Committee. My name is Becky Ford and I strongly oppose House Bill 403. Last year, I gave testimony to both this committee and the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, sharing that I have had chronic major depression, anxiety, and PTSD. It took all the strength I had to try and explain how I understand what it's like to want to die, as I'm a multiple suicide survivor.

I've spent the past, almost year, thinking about those testimonies. Because as I often say, you never know when you will be drug into that black hole, again, I felt like I needed to speak up for those who couldn't. But it was after reading a book by a gentleman my age, who was for Medical Aide in Dying, was signed up for it in Canada, but is now a popular opponent, who has Schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorder, PTSD, is a recovering alcoholic, and spent years as a homeless person. It was his book released in December 2023, *Therefore Choose Life*, where he wrote, "Some people are embarrassed to talk about their mental illness. I am not. What's there to be embarrassed about...we're all "damaged goods". We've been broken in one way or another" (Dunlop, 81). While it wasn't like me to openly say that I always knew I had a purpose in mental health advocacy because of what I've been through, would in some small way help someone else.

To say that life has been a walk in the park since last March, would really be pushing the limits. Because the thing about last year is I testified right in the middle of being handed off from specialist to specialist to find help with a 2022 diagnosis of fibromyalgia, or chronic pain. You wouldn't see me doing my own hair, I couldn't reach my hands that far up. Thankfully, I did finally find a genius of a specialist that wasn't dismissive and who actually listened, and who I adore. And despite his own inventions, or surgical procedures that brought relief I never believed could be done, along with extensive physical therapy, things just kept getting worse. My left side would go numb, then my once admired and perfect memory started losing its ability to handle things short term. I could no longer do the things I enjoy the most, writing something that made sense regardless of the length (I'm known for dissertation texts), to reading as intensely and passionately as I always have, or being able to read a book in a day, or a few, as I always did. My speech became increasingly slow, nothing I noticed, but the first thing numerous neurologists did, as well as those who knew me best. I was finally also diagnosed with a neurological disorder this past fall. A disorder that 4 to 12 people per 100,000 receive (NIH, 2024).

Between not being able to continue my goal of running a full marathon, messing up recipes to simple instructions, making the wrong turn on a route I drove every day, to not being able to think of the word I needed when talking, I felt like a burden. There were days when I didn't want to get out of bed. When my dream Italy trip fell through this past July, one marked on my calendar since 2022, one I was prepped for, that's when there didn't seem like a point to dreaming.

I'm familiar with feeling like a burden. Right now, every illness I have is invisible. But the pain I experience is so real.

I'm fortunate, I come from a loving family that will do anything for me. But not everyone has that. I wouldn't be able to cook without help lifting a heavy pot. That's when the voice of depression is it's loudest, when others must do things for you, or you must turn down invites due to sensory issues. That voice that tells you the people you love don't deserve to put up with this and you want to do everything you can to not be a burden...that is the beginning of suicidal ideation. I can easily tell everyone in this room that they have value, but to say I do, right now, is not something I believe.

While I have a tremendous medical team that believes in the same values I do, before I ever started voicing an opinion on this bill, I was familiar with it. Because in 2016, I was handed a pamphlet by a therapist I was seeing at the time. I was not in a dark state, I didn't even have suicidal ideation going on at the time. But because he knew my diagnosis was "chronic," he briefly explained I'd never get better. And then I was handed a pamphlet, one that had the face of Brittany Maynard, a young woman with a terminal illness who the press followed as she went to Oregon and chose physician assisted suicide. Her husband, Dan Diaz, was also on that pamphlet, and I walked out of the Senate hearings because I was getting triggered. But I did speak with him, I like to think of it now, as exposure therapy. It jingled my 1-minute testimony, but an expert handed me a pamphlet and told me that's what I should choose. My first thoughts were not knowing what I do now, but I knew I couldn't go back to him as a patient, he didn't see me as anyone valuable. When you already don't see yourself as having value, even on a "good day," you need to be able to have medical professionals who see value in your life, too.

I've been informed of the research. Some days, this bill didn't allow me to get out of bed. The message of opposition from someone like me, who has 3 chronic invisible illnesses now, is not simply that every life is important regardless of what their physically, or mentally facing, but that what makes my life important, in the long view, in the providential view, is almost always what the world now considers silly, trivial—a burden. This bill labels me and anyone else who carries a chronic diagnosis, to a mere challenge, as a burden. So many great bills are being introduced to help with veteran suicide, to expand mental healthcare access to the youth, or to provide better insurance and drug coverage. But this bill doesn't fit. If you allow for this, for doctors to dictate to vulnerable populations that they have no worth, for insurance companies to tell a patient that their diagnosis is better suited for Medical Aid in Dying, as the mere suggestion does just that, how will any of us, facing any challenge, any illness, terminal, or otherwise, help pave the way for someone else given the same diagnosis in the future for their lives to be just a little better? That's what keeps me sticking around. This is a bill with no oversight, that defends an actually horrible way to die, it isn't "peaceful". Who will see that it doesn't trickle down to healthy individuals who then believe because a parent, or a grandparent did this, that this is the solution? Why would anyone want to live in a state with the message of 'survival of the fittest'?

I believe those who hold office should be standing up for vulnerable patients and sending out a message of resiliency and hope, not one of burden shaming and death. Please do not pass this bill.

Thank you.